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Accounting for the messiness of the research process: The fieldpath approach

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Abstract

Purpose of this paper	It has recently become more acknowledged that there is a quality of "messiness" to the qualitative research process. This paper introduces the fieldpath approach—a hermeneutically inspired framework—to account for the non-linearity, uncertainty and ambiguity of the research process.
Design/methodology /approach	This theoretical paper reviews how the scope of hermeneutics has been partly misunderstood. The paper discusses how the scope of hermeneutics has lately been expanded by works such as Günter Figal's *Objectivity: The Hermeneutical and Philosophy* (2010).
Findings	The fieldpath approach proposes that a heightened relation to materiality enables the messiness of the process to be preserved, while at the same time offering a way to find one's footing in the midst of ontologically incomplete phenomena that are still—in a processual fashion—forming and becoming.
Research limitations	This is a conceptual article. In addition to the research mentioned here, more studies would be needed to legitimise, test and refine the approach.
Practical implications	Objectivity provides an additional criterion for researchers to lean on when facing the non-linearity and unexpected turns inherent in the qualitative research process.
Social implications	The stress on materiality involves an ethical dimension. Post-human ethics are concerned with the future environmental consequences and sustainability of the material world. The way that matter matters in our methodologies is of primary importance.
What is the originality/value of the paper?	First, the paper emphasises that hermeneutics, contrary to the common perception, does offer criteria for evaluating between interpretations. Second, it introduces the notion of hermeneutic objectivity, which stresses the importance of materiality for interpretations. Third, it introduces the fieldpath approach, which, based on the previous criterion of hermeneutic objectivity, allows for the messiness of the research process, while also preserving a tight grip on the hermeneutic imperative of "understanding in a new way".

Keywords

Gadamer, hermeneutics, research design, messiness, objectivity, process

Introduction: truth and/or method?

> *Two roads diverged in a wood, and I –*
> *I took the one less traveled by,*
> *And that has made all the difference.*
> (Frost, 1993, p. 1)

Applied to the research process, the poetic lines above point to a specific challenge: Decisions and diversions can take the process in very different directions. Research methods do not guarantee a clear process. Van Maanen *et al.* (2007) note that there is no magical or straightforward sequence to organising various parts of the research process into an order. Also, no method automatically produces theory out of data (Eisenhardt, 1989; Flick, 2009; Glaser and Strauss, 1967). The reality of doing research is that it is a complex, insecure and unanticipated endeavour, not an entirely analytical journey. To accommodate the iterative, cyclical back-and-forth nature of the qualitative research process, it has been suggested that the qualitative research process be based on an open and flexible design that includes all the necessary phases, but one that does *not* necessarily follow a certain order (cf. Corbin and Strauss, 2015; Frost and Stablein, 1992; Maxwell, 2013). This may be the case, for instance, in studies where fieldwork spans over years and across geographical regions (Cole, 2013), where the task gradually develops from the initial agreement (Fayard and van Maanen, 2015), in particularly dynamic environments (Garud *et al.*, 2008), and in contexts that deal with marginalised, hidden, or invisible texts or experiences (Grandy *et al*., 2015).

The impetus for this paper comes from the current discussions on the unorderly, non-standard and messy nature of the qualitative research process (Donnelly *et al*., 2013; Duberley, 2015; Lambotte and Meunier, 2013). As Donnelly *et al*. (2013) describe, qualitative research includes the recognition "of the mess, of the iterative and emotional aspects of our research" (p. 4). Alvesson and Sköldberg (2009) attest that the research process in social sciences is "very much less certain and more problematic than common sense or conventional methodological textbooks would have us think" (p. 2). Considering

what researchers in real-life practice go through, “any narrative suggesting an orderly, standard model of the research process is rather misleading” (van Maanen *et al.*, 2007, p. 1146). Based on researchers’ own accounts, the process is filled with doubt and uncertainties (Locke *et al.*, 2008). As Sergi and Hallin (2011) note, conducting qualitative research is linked to the whole person, and therefore “doing research is performing it, and performing it cannot happen without feeling a wide range of emotions, without appealing to who we are or without questioning what we are doing” (p. 191).

This paper draws from Garud *et al.*’s (2008) notion of the incompleteness of research design, and joins Lambotte and Meunier (2013) in asking “How can we account for non-linearity and contingency in the research process?” (p. 86). Apart of Gadamer’ (2004) hermeneutics, the proposition advanced in this article was inspired by readings on the Japanese design philosophy of wabi-sabi that does not regard incompleteness and roughness as a design failure, but rather as elementary and generative to the process (Koren, 2008). This is in line with Sergi and Hallin (2011), who insist that there is a need to better understand the human performance behind the research process. As will be discussed, this matches with the hermeneutic view on human sciences that is not after “similarities, regularities, and conformities to law” (Gadamer, 2004, p. 2), but is concerned with taking measure of life’s irregularities and inconsistencies (Gadamer, 2004).

While the overall trajectory of the paper will be on the messiness of the research process, the problem of interpretation provides the anchor point regarding where the messiness shows up. To begin with, the paper draws from the classical notion of interpretation: What do we rely on when interpreting empirical materials? Hermeneutics has been accused of not providing clear criteria for interpretation, but the paper presents three hermeneutic criteria to rely on: the *hermeneutic imperative*, *historicity* and *the hermeneutic object*. In the following sections, the article combines Figal’s (2010) hermeneutic concept of “objectivity” with Heidegger’s imagery of walking along a country path (2002, 2010) to develop the fieldpath approach, which is oriented towards materiality and appreciating that which stands against us. Thus, the fieldpath approach contributes to discussions on the incompleteness and messiness of the qualitative research process by introducing a way in which to account for the uncertainty as a generative part of research. It also joins the discussion on how to continue during fieldwork and analysis when facing

adversity (Helin, 2013) and answers the call "to broaden the conceptualization of 'method' to incorporate discovery processes" (Locke *et al*., 2004, p. 1).

Confusion with hermeneutics

I became acutely aware of the messiness of the research process during my Ph.D., where the task was to analyse social interaction during 18 hours of videotaping, and to make sense of other voluminous observations, materials and interviews. Though 18 hours may not sound like much, videos are not about text or talk alone, but about the wealth of interactions and the entire material surroundings. What should one observe in all the countless small actions and interactions? How does the material environment, the office atmosphere or the whole context where people are – and come from – contribute to relations? How should one thematise constructions that are partly entities, partly discourse-based, partly visible, partly historical?

Although there is, at least theoretically, systematics, and a certain methodology and organisation for how to begin with and finish collecting empirical materials, the joy of and problem with empirical materials is that the analysis can take you anywhere. At some later undefined point in time the question is: When do we know when we are done? The standard (methodological) answer is saturation: The analysis needs to reach a point where no additional materials are found to further the categorising process (Flick, 2009). The path to saturation is often murky, because outcomes in practice do not necessarily result from a step-by-step process, but from iterative "networks of actions" (Lambotte and Meunier, 2013, p. 85): There are life situations, connections and ideas that we, as people, live through, and which have an impact on categorising and the whole research process. Despite saturation, the inevitable question remains: Once we need to make decisions and write down the results (based on, among other things, categorising), how do we justify our choices?

The knowledge we produce as findings is tied to the methods – the way we went into the field and the tools we employed –, including what, within that framework, is considered valid knowledge (epistemology) and the phenomenon (ontology). Roughly, the available theoretical positions range between positivist-materialist notions and more interpretative post-modern variations. Each of these comes with different epistemological and

ontological commitments. Hermeneutics is typically used as an example of the interpretative position (Burrell and Morgan, 1979; Cunliffe, 2010; Hatch and Cunliffe, 2006; Martela, 2015; Morgan and Smirich, 1980). By reviewing five key journals in the field of organisation and management studies (OMS) (*Academy of Management Journal*, *Human Relations*, *Organization*, *Organization Studies* and *Philosophy of Management*), one gains the impression that hermeneutics is used as a synonym for interpretation or for the qualitative method. As references are rare to other hermeneutic content in OMS, the common perception of hermeneutics has become a major limitation to its wider reception.

While hermeneutics is seen as opening up more vistas and interpretative perspectives – thus celebrating a "pluralism of perspectives" –, the challenge is sometimes declared like this: How does plurality help in "assessing the value of these different perspectives"? (Martela, 2015, p. 550). According to Martela's (2015) comparison of methodological frameworks, for instance, pragmatics relies on "warranted guidance", whereas hermeneutics has "no generally accepted standards" (Martela, 2015, p. 548) for assessing whether one interpretation is more correct, valuable, right, or plausible than the other. While that claim is but a minor detail in an otherwise fine article, it was published in a high-ranking refereed journal, which implies that the reviewers and editors accepted the claim, and herein, it is therefore regarded (maybe slightly unjustly, but for the ease of argument) as the "general view" on hermeneutics. Hermeneutics, so the critique goes, lacks a process and is thus open to all opinions, whence the question arises: Can hermeneutics solve the problem of plurality that it creates?

The general view reflects three misunderstandings that this paper calls the "confusion with hermeneutics": First and foremost, in the light of contemporary hermeneutics in the Gadamerian tradition, it is a mis-apprehension to hold hermeneutics for just a tool for deciding between interpretations. As George (2012) points out, Gadamer's hermeneutic project is married rather to the notion of life than to that of text: "The principal concern of hermeneutical philosophers is not to establish unalterable truths, firm foundations, or certitudes but rather to elucidate the terms of human life as it is actually lived" (p. 18). Following Heidegger's phenomenology, hermeneutics concerns accounting for the human being-in-the-world; how we are embedded in our environment in the first place. It is this temporal, evolving relation to *life* that is at the core of hermeneutic interest and not the

provision of an epistemological aptitude. Second, despite the general view, hermeneutics does provide standards for epistemological arguments, and these will be referred to as the hermeneutic imperative, historicity and the hermeneutic object.

Third, hermeneutics does not aim at creating a solid standard for interpretation. This misunderstanding may stem from the idea of the natural sciences still lurking in the background: there is a need to justify approaches that – in the eyes of natural-scientific ideals – look un-scientific. But qualitative analysis is not about a pure form of knowledge that is detached from human life, but is about preserving some all-too-human reasoning. This also includes conflicting motives and the irrationalities of everyday life. Hermeneutics, for its part, is about solving these problems as a constant *on-going* exercise in sensemaking. Consequently, what kind of advice does it provide for the interpreter?

Hermeneutic standards for interpretation

After this short clarification regarding the confusion with hermeneutics, let us focus more precisely on analyses and findings, that is, how hermeneutic sensemaking takes place and what kind of standards it provides for assessing the value of different interpretations. In general, qualitative research does not aim at replicating informants' views, taking them at face value, or applying an existing theory (Fayard and van Maanen, 2015, p. 21; Feldman, 1995). Rather, the task is to find something *new, novel and unique* (Flick, 2009; Locke and Golden-Biddle, 1997), *surprising* that solves a *mystery* (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2007), or something that extends *beyond* our preconcepts (prejudices) of what we already understand (Gadamer, 2004). This process has been compared to the artist whose passion is to create something new (Taylor and Ladkin, 2009) and to a beachcomber who is after "affordances": deliberately seeking, but finding something unexpected (Gabriel, 2015). It has also been likened to the sailor navigating difficult waters, where there is a need to be able to "invent a passage [and] establish a route in what appears a hostile unknown environment" (Stavrides, 2001). Again, this is by no means a simple task, as the process "is in practice rarely (…) linear (…), but rather involves iterative back-and-forth movement between different parts" (Martela, 2015, p. 547), between the researcher, academic community, reviewers and readers. Taking this iterative-ness and messiness into consideration, what kinds of standards does hermeneutics provide? Are there any criteria

for preferring one turn or interpretation to another? In what follows, the paper considers three hermeneutic standards for interpretation: the hermeneutic imperative, historicity and the hermeneutic object.

The first criterion: the hermeneutic imperative

To appreciate how hermeneutics deals with different interpretations, first we need to examine the key hermeneutic concept of understanding. Instead of saturation or a set standard against which to judge various interpretations, in hermeneutical philosophy, the first criterion is an imperative of understanding: "It is enough to say that we understand in a *different way, if we understand at all*" (Gadamer, 2004, p. 296 – emphasis in the original). Let us now focus on what this key hermeneutic tenet means and how it should be defined if we want to call it the *hermeneutic imperative*.

The criterion of creating new understanding has been applied in a looser and in a stricter fashion. Based on the above journal review, the term "hermeneutic" is regularly used to indicate interpretative research in a loose fashion, as a by-passing reference to justify one's conduct. It needs to be emphasised that to fulfil the hermeneutic imperative requires both hard work and creative skills. Typically, several rounds of analysis and various methodological entries (ethnography, narratives, thematic analysis, vignettes, historical accounts etc.) are needed in order to produce solid, novel interpretations that add to the understanding of the issue at hand. One should not become desperate if the analysis proves harder than expected – the research process is *supposed to* be(come) different than anticipated and the reviewers are gatekeepers of quality. But not all interpretations were born equal and hermeneutics does not accept "anything goes" relativism either.

This discussion shows that understanding in a different way does not indicate an empathetic wish to create one more perspective, but is, strictly speaking, a *hermeneutic imperative*: Qualitative analysis has not advanced to the point that understanding in a new way can take place. This can prove a tricky task, because all understanding relies on prejudices, and as prejudices, by definition, are something that is basically already known, the findings need to go beyond these: to the unknown, "the unexpected and the unanticipated", as Alvesson and Kärreman (2007, p. 1266) call it. There are at least three indicators for assessing whether the findings satisfy the hermeneutic imperative.

The first indicator is that understanding in a different way cannot be acclaimed individually, as the outcome needs to be seen as unique, valuable and interesting by the "sympathetic subcommunity" one belongs to (Alvesson and Gabriel, 2013, p. 251; Locke and Golden-Biddle, 1997). "The feedback one gets from the scientific community leads often to reassessing one's founding assumptions as regards the problematic situation in the first place, and thus the individual and collective levels of inquiry are in constant interaction with each other" (Martela, 2015, p. 547). Although this indicator is common to all sciences, in hermeneutics, it creates a critical connection to tradition: Understanding connects with how the issue is understood thus far and what *others* have done *previously*. Thus, *understanding differently* creates a tension between joining and separating, similarity and difference. Locke *et al*. (2008, pp. 912–913) describe a student learning to see a fish more properly by getting closer and closer to it. Simultaneously, the process includes distancing oneself from one's earlier efforts. The long-term effect is learning to see during the process. Even in joining we can problematise and challenge the current assumptions (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2011). Whatever one comes up with, one needs to ask: How does this advance the research I am joining? What is it that I am joining?

The second indicator for assessing whether the research is in line with the hermeneutic imperative is that novel views go *beyond prejudices*. Gadamer (2004) famously defines how, due to prejudices, we cannot get to things directly: Language, cultural ways of seeing, and our inherited concepts – in short: tradition – illustrate the horizon within which the researcher operates and set the limits of understanding. Without prejudices and some types of preconcepts, *no* understanding is possible, so there is no way of avoiding them. Heidegger in *Being and Time* (1962) argues that prejudices form the fundamental structure of understanding. As a consequence, *any* interpretation is based on what the researcher already knows, and any finding is, paradoxically, more or less familiar already. For instance, in my Ph.D., I realised that leadership is typically embedded in a success type of discourse that employs vocabulary on heroic success stories, winning, best practices, key competencies, talents and high potentials/achievers. The success discourse is an implicit prejudice in leadership. To be successful and to aim at perfection are admirable goals, but when trying to learn new (post-heroic) ways of framing leadership, this vocabulary is a hindrance to learning, because it does not allow for failures and imperfections that are at

the core of human learning efforts. Out of this inherent paradox grew my first real finding (after three rounds of analysis): that incompleteness is a neglected but necessary category of leadership learning. In not aligning with mainstream leadership thinking, the finding illustrates that the hermeneutic task is to cut through the familiarity and to reach a point where the familiar looks strange and novel. Novelty is imperative for understanding.

Hermeneutics illustrates how understanding typically takes place within the circle of interpretation, in which the whole and the part inform each other in a mutually constitutive fashion (Figure 1).

FIGURE 1 HERE

Yet the research process creating novel insights is not symmetric, but is based on a more irregular, playful back-and-forth movement. The back-and-forth movement is productive, Heidegger asserts.

> *But if we see this circle as a vicious one and look out for ways of avoiding it, even if we just "sense" it as an inevitable imperfection, then the act of understanding has been misunderstood from the ground up.* (…) What is decisive is not to get out of the circle but to come into it in the right way. (…) In the circle is hidden a positive possibility of the most primordial kind of knowing (Heidegger, 1962, pp. 194–195 – italics in original).

Accordingly, prejudices are not a hindrance to understanding, yet the research results are determined more by how we *enter* the process of interpretation than by the actions that take place afterwards. Therefore, the reviewer should inquire into how the author entered the research. The framing (theory and method) informs us about the author's basic premises and provides access to what Heidegger calls "the most primordial kind of knowing" that the author relies on. It shows how the author came to the subject and to his/her particular views in the first place and thus helps us to assess the novelty of the findings – whether these are novel or whether they repeat the framing.

The third indicator for assessing whether the hermeneutic imperative is reached is to

distinguish between "the true prejudices, by which we *understand*, [and] the *false* ones, by which we *misunderstand*" (Gadamer, 2004, p. 298 – italics in original). Here, Gadamer clearly states that not all (subjective) interpretations are equal, but that some are more correct than others. This criterion can be applied to fake news, too: if the news collides with my prejudices, which one holds, the news or my prejudices? To assess this, often more historical input is needed, that is, the finding needs to be assessed against the historical becoming of the phenomenon. Another typical way in which to create a misunderstanding is *not* to check whether we are talking about the same subject (Gadamer, 2004, p. 294) and to neglect the time aspect: Concepts in OMS are subject to change. If the research wants to fulfil the hermeneutic imperative, the research phenomenon needs to be conceptualised in processual terms, because otherwise the results may not be "qualitative enough" (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2009) but will resemble a study of an "object" reality. This is where the next main criterion, historicity, becomes relevant.

The second criterion: historicity

Instead of generalisability, the value of qualitative research lies in the possibility of it accounting for and understanding the unique circumstances around the events. As this requires knowledge about how the phenomenon evolved into its current form, part of the inquiry is directed towards history and tradition. Thus, Gadamer extends Heidegger's fore-structure of understanding (see above) to a concept of effective *historicity* (Gadamer, 2004, p. 299). The reasoning that we use to formulate statements about the reality relies upon traditions, and the culture and environment we are born into. The researcher's own horizon of understanding is formed and limited historically and all results emerge within this framework. While the researcher's previous experience forms the basis for his/her understanding, it is to be assessed as to whether these unspoken prejudices are false or true, whether they lead to understanding or misunderstanding.

Gadamer – who, to remind you, the reader, lived from 1900–2001 and thus through the years of 1914, 1918, 1929, 1939, 1945 and 1989 that shaped life in Europe – was well-versed in the impact of the historiographical context, which led him to state:

> In fact history does not belong to us, but we belong to it. Long before we

> understand ourselves through the process of self-examination, we understand ourselves in a self-evident way in the family, society and state in which we live. The focus of subjectivity is a distorting mirror. The self-awareness of the individual is only a flickering in the closed circuits of historical life (Gadamer, 2004, p. 278).

Although calling self-awareness "a flickering" may sound submissive, Gadamer does not deny individuality (Figal, 2002). Historicity refers to the framework within which individuality takes place. Any interpretation stems much more from this shared cultural framework than from individual creativity. This is the reason why Gadamer insists on paying attention to prejudices in order to gain new knowledge. Interpretations of empirical materials are tied to the interpreter's own horizon of understanding, and in this fashion, they are directed towards both past and present interests (Gadamer, 2004).

That interpretative categories are culturally produced is elegantly shown in the famous conversational example: "The baby cried. The mommy picked it up." Sacks, 1972, in Peräkylä and Ruusuvuori, 2013) In that connection the baby and mommy are typically understood as baby and *her* mother, although it could be any mother. "Husband and wife" and "doctor and patient" are similar categorical pairings (Peräkylä and Ruusuvuori, 2013, p. 285). Ethnographers have shown that that culturally and verbally inherited action patterns inform police officers at their work and on patrol duty, too (Ekman, 1999; Goffman, 2014; van Maanen, 1989). Leadership research is another example where traditional prejudices prevail: Although flat hierarchies, leaderless leadership, networks and decentralisation are current practices in organising, traditional leadership research is in danger of not stating anything adequate about these aspects, because it is so decisively based on the category "leader individuals", thus denying to see collective and plural actions as leadership (Crevani *et al*., 2010; Denis *et al*., 2012; Salovaara and Bathurst, 2016).

That tradition plays a role in interpretation has been acknowledged in other research methodologies, too. The same idea is presented in the social constructionism of Berger and Luckmann (1967: When social interactions and certain patterns are repeated, they grow into habits that become institutionalised societal behaviours with collectively shared meanings. The way in which two initially separate things are connected can be illogical

and arbitrary, but they become institutionally attached through culture and tradition. As Weick (1969) shows in his enactment theory, this functions towards the future, too: In using pre-set concepts, we construct the world around us. For instance, as Fayard and van Maanen (2015) show in their study, when people use new vocabulary and concepts to describe their organisational culture, the process of naming equals to forming, shaping and creating culture.

As a criterion for assessing the value of interpretation, historicity highlights the processual nature of phenomena. In process research, the subjects are defined as something that has been evolving into a certain state (of now), that is forming constantly and that will be slightly different tomorrow. Hermeneutics refers to this process as historicity, where both the phenomenon being studied and the researcher's own context are evolving. An understanding about how the researcher entered the topic is essential to enable an assessment of the results. In terms of the hermeneutic circle (above), for the researcher, historicity means that progress along the circle is not linear, but includes back-and-forth movement along the path. In case there is little of that movement visible in the research report, the reader (reviewer) needs to try to assess to which degree the development of the researcher's own understanding (prejudices) becomes visible in the research report. That provides a clear criterion for assessing qualitative research: Is the phenomenon revealed in its historical form through historicity? What is the degree of transparency in regard to the researcher's own historiographical context and its impact on how the phenomenon is entered into and framed? Based on this, how did the researcher's own understanding evolve?

The third criterion: the hermeneutic object

The empirical materials in qualitative research are not gathered through distance or detachment, but in the field, in an embodied fashion where the "the researcher brings her whole self into [the research process]" (Sergi and Hallin, 2011). The knowledge is formed in this close relation and proximity where s/he needs to "become familiar with a thing, even intimately acquainted with it" (George, 2012, p. 33). The familiarity with the thing underlines two aspects. First, it does not take place in a single moment, but grows substantially over time. Whatever we know now will be partly overcome by what we learn

later. Second, we confront the phenomenon in its exteriority, as something that "is and remains outside the subject and its sphere" (George, 2009, p. 904). This procedure can be described as a long-term back-and-forth movement, a gradually growing relation between human and non-human. Life, from this viewpoint, is about living with things and getting to know them.

Such an emphasis underlines that how we deal with things is not insignificant. Hermeneutics acknowledges that phenomena possess qualities independent from us. In this respect, Figal (2004, p. 30) distinguishes between an object that fits the categories and a hermeneutic object as a phenomenon. The "mere" object refers to something that has become institutionalised and is a taken-for-granted physical, ahistorical thing. In contrast, the identity of a hermeneutic object is not fully defined, but forms in a play between the person and object. The hermeneutic object is something we come across and still wonder about, and therefore the potential of philosophical inquiry is inexhaustible (George, 2009, p. 905). The relation has a rewarding "undeveloped fullness of the possible" (Figal, 2010, p. 98), is "pregnant with meaningfulness" (George, 2009, p. 906) and the meaning of it is "never finished" (Gadamer, 2004, p. 298). The question is whether we allow this play or not, that is, whether the things are pre-categorised, or whether we allow them "life", as it were.

What is the criterion we are talking about here? It is an ethical consideration about the categories: Where these come from and, again, what concepts precede and contribute to them. Hermeneutics does not aim to formulate the relation to the phenomenon it studies in an objectifying or reifying fashion, but to make the historicity of the phenomenon more transparent. The hermeneutic object is not something the researcher is able to create alone or to willingly interpret in any possible way, as stated in the first criterion. Rather, the researcher takes part in a phenomenon that evolves and has its own logic, and the research task is to join this movement. To illustrate this, Gadamer (2004) talks about play ontology, which he likens to the movement of waves, light and fire that form and maintain their existence in a constant, undefined movement (p. 104). Accordingly, any field we study is not defined by the researcher's subjectivity. Instead, the play ontology reverses the relation between the game and player, wherein "all playing is being-played" (Gadamer, 2004, p. 106). The researcher becomes submerged in the play, and in order to understand this

movement, s/he needs to join a processual becoming of events. The play ontology, with its emphasis on being-played, is a metaphor for human embeddedness in and entanglement with the material environment.

This reversal image also applies to how the research is conducted: The first and foremost research task in the hermeneutic view is not to define the game (the field) but to understand it. The task for Geertz (1973) in his classic study on Balinese cock-fighting was to make sense of what initially looks like chaotic reactions to cock-fighting. He called for a "thick description" to account for the "deep play". Yet there is a need to elaborate this relation more to be able to appreciate how the hermeneutic interest in materiality develops into a full-fledged research approach.

Objectivity and listening to the materials

The hermeneutic object is a pre-form of what Figal, in his book *Objectivity* (2010), develops further. The book indicates a new interest towards the *materiality* of things.[i] As stated above, hermeneutics is typically (loosely) associated with interpretation, but that is not the full picture. In *Objectivity,* Figal proposes that interpretation should be led primarily by the exteriority and objectivity of things. With the call to objectivity, Figal is, in his own way, following Edmund Husserl's phenomenological parole *zu den Sachen selbst*, to the things themselves. The original German title of Figal's book, *Gegenständlichkeit*, is derived from *Gegenstand* – often translated as "object" – and it literally refers to "what stands over against, what is across from and remains standing across from" (Figal, 2010, p. 107): There is something that, despite various readers and interpretations, remains and opposes the interpreter. The term "object" has its origins in the Latin *obiectum*, literally "thrown against", derived from two parts of the word: *ob*, against, and the verb *iecere*, to throw. In this usage, an object can be associated with "reification" (German: *Verdinglichung*), where something that is not a "thing" becomes fixed as one (Ballnat, 2012, pp. 45–46).

Considering that hermeneutics has become synonymous with an interpretive, subjective approach, the English term "objectivity" is prone to misunderstanding. But it should not be mistaken for a return to naïve realism or positivist objectivism, as Figal (2009b) warns:

> A philosophy that proceeds in an objectifying fashion, that conceives of everything as thing-like, existing only to be observed, researched, and determined, misses the original access to things (…). This access does not consist in scientific observation, but rather in the experience of things in their originary context (Figal, 2009b, p. 5).

In contrast to correspondence theory that would require "a closer and closer fitting of theory to what is conceived as an *independently* existing social reality" (Johnson, 2015, p. 320 – italics added), hermeneutics refers to reality as something we relate to only through that relation becoming an object for knowledge pursuits. So, what is objectivity that defies objectifying?

For Figal, allowing a thing to come into play requires that we become closely familiar with it, as when interacting with the thing practically. Similar to Heidegger's example of a hammer breaking (Heidegger, 1962), the meaning of, for instance, a copy machine, is revealed when it cannot be taken for granted: when it is broken (Orr, 1995) or antiquated (Humphries and Smith, 2014). These situations put a demand on us: We cannot rely on the regular set of practices, but need to re-think. This new relation is guided by acknowledging the *gegen-stand* and its new exterior (in)stability. But by definition – and almost paradoxically – the thing, "what stands over against" us, resists our attempt to get closer: Its stability resists merging with it. George (2012) describes this as a circular movement: While we orient ourselves by the exteriority of the thing, it also resists our attempts and thus provides a clear instance of something independent from us. For Heidegger, the term "nearness" is derived from the Greek *anchibasie*, which he translates as "going-into-nearness" (Heidegger, 2010, p. 100). The simultaneous nearness and distance is achieved in relation to the copy machine: We typically have a distance to it as a tool, but when it breaks down, it affects us, and suddenly, in not-functioning, comes closer.

It is pivotal to appreciate how hermeneutics develops this human connection with objects and materiality: "The philosophical endeavor does not need to be understood as a form of detachment from life, but, rather, as an intensification of life that results from its achievement of a heightened relation to objects" (George, 2010, p. xii). Gadamer's interest

in looking into the details of phenomena is an inspiration for Figal[ii] and this interest stems from Gadamer's studies of Husserlian phenomenology, where the task becomes "patient, descriptive, detailed work" and where "all rash combinations and clever constructions were an abomination" (Gadamer, 2008, pp. 132–133). Gadamer remembers Husserl insisting that his students should: "Not always [go for] the big bill, gentlemen; small change, small change!" (Gadamer, 2008, p. 133). Drawing from this phenomenological attitude, Gadamer (2008) recalls how in the 1920s, the young philosophy professor, Martin Heidegger, created an unusual fascination for philosophy by showing how philosophising does not need to start with (historical) abstract concepts, but can be about one's own life. In Heidegger's hands, philosophy suddenly became alive and radical. Also, Figal's turn to objectivity is a call to apprehending the detailed and careful study of the materials at hand.

Qualitative analysis requires being precise with the current relations to the environment. Releasement indicates that one is not to be guided solely by will and prejudices, but should be responsive to the context in which the phenomena occur: "One watches *how they show themselves*; the focus is solely on this self-showing, on the how of being included and going forth" (Figal, 2010, p. 122 – italics in original). When materials provoke ambiguous interpretations and the research process grows messy, the research can refer to the materials and pay detailed attention to their material being-there: That-which-is-there-against us offers concrete indications for the analysis.

As above, objectivity in hermeneutics joins the interest in materiality sparked within various fields ranging from OMS to sociology, history and archaeology. Also in hermeneutics, there are calls for the "rehabilitation" of objectivity, where this project represents a critique on (post)modern philosophy's rejection of materiality, matter and physicality (Figal, 2010, p. 107; George, 2012, p. 30). Hermeneutics reframes the issue, though, by not calling for studying subject and object separately, but as a process of getting to know better that which has already been there and still stays there-against-us as *Gegenstand*. Figal pronounces the renewed interest in things by stating: "The human being is not the measure of all things" (Figal, 2010, p. 348).

To overcome dualisms, this reframing is exposed by Figal (2010) stating: "The interpretation doesn't start, it constitutes" (p. 74). When we see something as something, we already share a certain frame, which means that we, in the Latin sense of *constitute*,

jointly compose it. A similar view on shared sensemaking is expressed in a very hermeneutic fashion by Weick (1995):

> Sensemaking never starts. The reason it never starts is that pure duration never stops. People are always in the middle of things, which become things, only when those same people focus on the past from some point beyond it. (…) There is widespread recognition that people are always in the middle of things. What is less well developed are the implications of that insight for sensemaking (Weick, 1995, p. 43).

What Figal and Weick here point to is analogical to Heidegger's notion of entering the cycle of interpretation: Being in the middle of things equals to joining the flow and being aware of the constitutive nature of this activity. The quality of interpretation stems from the quality of the description of the situation (Weick, 2007). The commitment to detailed description means listening to and being guided by things, and configuring how we know about them. Unlike the positivist sciences' distance to the object of study, phenomenologically oriented hermeneutics turns into an almost opposite interest, to proximity. The question is then, how do we relate to the world? What is that intimate relation?

The entrance is through the instant relation to materiality, which, in the hermeneutic view, is about conjoining. But the instant relation and non-linearity call forth one more detail of materiality and nature: imperfections, asymmetries and constant change. In nature, there are no two identical forms, as when each leaf is different from another when observed carefully. Instead of aiming at ideals of symmetry, linearity and mathematical order, accepting asymmetry in the research process is not necessarily a fault, because it allows for the incorporation of "the complex situations in living organizations" (Parviainen and Koivunen, 2006) into the research. Interestingly, there is a precursor to this research design in the Japanese design philosophy wabi-sabi. Deriving from the Japanese tea ceremony that can be very polished, aestheticized by rules and ritualistic, wabi-sabi appears as an antidote to this in finding "a beauty of things imperfect, impermanent, and incomplete" (Koren, 2008, p. 7). Wabi-sabi design is displayed in rustic, asymmetric or bent forms,

irregularities, and simple and rough unfinished surfaces. There is an inherent appreciation of incompleteness in wabi-sabi. Wabi-sabi applies the zen mindset of anti-rationalism, where the essential knowledge "can be transmitted only from mind to mind, not through the written or spoken word" (Koren, 2008, p. 16).

In regard to knowledge, the fieldpath approach takes note of the importance of sense-based and embodied knowledge, and joins aesthetic epistemology where embodiment is accepted as a valid form of knowledge (Gagliardi, 1996; Ropo and Parviainen, 2001; Strati 1999, 2007). Today, an embodied understanding has become more accepted in research methodology and textbooks recognise the merits of embodiment (Helin, 2013; Denzin and Lincoln, 2013). Although there is hesitation in using embodied knowledge as it may feel like heresy in an academic context (Denzin and Lincoln, 2013, pp. 232–233), Gadamer also affirms that there is no "total determination of the object by cognition" (Gadamer, 2008, pp. 72–73) in hermeneutics either. Nevertheless, juxtaposing embodied and cognitive knowledge underlines the tension inherent in using embodied epistemologies.

Walking the fieldpath

The metaphor of walking a winding path is employed in Heidegger's (2010) text on *Gelassenheit*, releasement, where he portrays three persons – a scientist, scholar and guide – taking a walk along a fieldpath in the countryside. At dawn, as the forms of what they see begin to blur, the three begin to wonder how they know about their path and surroundings. They conclude that thinking about the things has (in Kantian epistemological tradition) been defined as an intentional act of will (as in, I know there is a tree), and they wonder whether it is possible to be guided by a non-willing attitude. In other words, Heidegger aims at going beyond the dichotomy of activity and passivity (Davis, 2010, p. xi). Would it be possible to describe things through more direct access to them than with preconcepts? This non-intentional attitude towards their environment they coin with the term *Gelassenheit*, which is usually translated as releasement to the things and letting-be, or as engaged releasement (Howard and Küpers, 2017). Though originating in religious experience (of letting oneself be free of doubt and unnecessary willing, and giving oneself up to God) (Davis, 2007, pp. 132–140; 2010, p. xi), in epistemological terms, releasement expresses a concern that our understanding of things around us – in research too – is guided

by terminology, concepts and intentions that become prejudices for any furthering of knowledge. This results in the researched phenomenon becoming approached from a limited perspective, as discussed above.

To confront the dependence on habitual thinking and prejudices, Heidegger (2010) proposes we challenge our habitual thinking by means of "meditative thinking", which implies careful consideration, slowing down and avoiding premature conclusions based on unreflective first impressions (Bambach, 2004). In emphasising a mode of wondering and wandering into the process of understanding what we are confronted with, releasement should leave more time for perception, reflection and allowing the things to show themselves. The methodological question is how to conceptualise our embeddedness in the environment and phenomena around us without a subject–object distinction.

The challenge of letting that-which-is-there-against us goes for artists, too, who have used releasement and meditative thinking as part of their toolkit for a long time. Figal takes the example of the French painter Paul Cézanne, "who spent hours before his subject, pausing, without coming to any rash conclusion. (…) This is no failure, however, but rather respect in the face of objectivity" (Figal, 2010, p. 115). The painter is facing and looking at *something*; he is carefully listening. In terms of getting to know the object of interest, this is how Figal describes the artistic process: "There was no expectation, no interest, and also no need, thus also no initially searching, then fixed, view" (Figal, 2010, p. 114). In terms of conducting research, this means challenging the use of institutionalised terms and fixed constants that research often relies on.

The fieldpath approach, in following the call for objectivity, requires a research attitude that takes "being itself as the measure of our conduct and not simply our wills, our interests, inclinations, or drives" (George, 2012, p. 20). In so doing, the fieldpath approach describes research that is oriented towards listening to the materiality of, for instance, copy machines, walls, ruins and language "talk" to us (Dale and Burrell, 2011; de Vaujany and Vaast, 2014; Gadamer, 1977; Humphries and Smith, 2014).

Apart from following the artist's path, another way of achieving the meditative effect of releasement is to compare it with walking. Walking is an allegory for conceptualising the relationship between the human and his/her environment as an experience from within rather than purely as a result of rational, detached and abstract thinking (Stavrides, 2001;

Zundel, 2012), as also depicted in Shotter's (2006) distinction between aboutness-thinking and thinking-from-within. An example of thinking-from-within occurs during the walk when the scientist formulates his conversation topic in a particularly matching way, which, he says, was not only up to him, but rather was initiated by the context of slow walking urging one to approach things carefully, "without violence". Walking, the partners agree, encourages a decelerated thinking mode, which they call the "inconspicuous escort" (Heidegger, 2009, p. 32) of the environment and language. The idea is to recognise, appreciate and then follow this escort. The escort, the scientist observes, is needed when conversation turns more difficult. The teacher replies that with "difficult", the other apparently means unusual and unordinary, which consists of growing unaccustomed to the willing aspects. That is Heidegger's way of expressing how the ordinary (prejudiced) observations usually come first and are thus primordial. The existing categories need to be undone in order to make room for the unordinary that occurs against, despite or beyond our willing.

As a consequence, in research practice, one does not come across unordinary things on a regular basis, because most of what is there as the field is already known. The dilemma for a researcher resembles very much that of the three partners: How can one make sense of the environment in a new way when habitual thinking and categories are first to enter the mind? Although the path and walking metaphors evoke images of linear progress, it is not the case. Rather, one is supposed to walk back and forth, as when, for instance, searching for mushrooms in the woods: They are sometimes so hidden that the first passing by does not reveal what is underneath. The linearity of walking is challenged in this playful re-walking of the same path. As a result, it is possible that dwelling, letting-be and being guided by the environment reveal something other than just a pre-defined track. Dwelling allows the objectivity of the material world to appear fuller, without the tools of predictability in one's possession in the first place, and it creates a hermeneutic space "between letting things be and being exposed to their exteriority" (George, 2012, p. 20). The night closing in makes the friends walk slower and forces them to contemplate. This deceleration, waiting and consideration is needed when things grow "darker", difficult, ambiguous and opaque. This goes to show how the hermeneutic imperative of "understanding in a different way" is as rare as it is difficult; but it is a feat at the core of

the fieldpath approach.

Discussion: the research machine is broken

This article took the messiness of the research process as its starting point. Rather than eliminating it, Lambotte and Meunier (2013) insist there is a need to make "the most of the messiness of research narratives" (p. 85). But if the current research practices mask it, it still exists and affects research in a hidden fashion, thus possibly compromising research outcomes (Sergi and Hallin, 2011). Alvesson and Gabriel (2013, p. 250) argue that the research machine – where the input would be data and the output theory – is broken, and we need better metaphors to accommodate organic research processes. As an alternative, this paper has presented the fieldpath as a metaphor for how research is, in practice, conducted: It is like walking in the woods and every diversion in the road can lead to different research outcomes. It is therefore essential to be mindful of how we *enter* the process and make decisions along the journey, as Heidegger (above) suggested.

Once in the process, hermeneutics offers three criteria for interpretations: the hermeneutic imperative, historicity and objectivity. The fieldpath approach is not an independent method or tool, but a framework that on the one hand encourages the researcher to wander off the beaten path, and on the other offers three criteria to rely on, a sort of compass in the midst of possible irritation. This dual tendency allows for the phenomenon to show itself more fully as a hermeneutic object in a fluid undefined state, without the constraints of a pre-set methodology, concepts or terminology. When the phenomenon is encountered in this fashion, there is a chance that "[o]ne's opinions about something come to be corrected insofar as the matter itself affects one", as Figal (2010, p. 6) formulates. Although Figal puts it gently and mildly, the statement should be taken as another formulation of the hermeneutic imperative: It is imperative to allow the matter to affect one. That is the challenge of *Gelassenheit*, of letting-be and releasement that should take place when one is in the midst of materials. The fieldpath approach urges listening to materiality "talk" to us (Dale and Burrell, 2011; de Vaujany and Vaast, 2014; Gadamer, 1977; Humphries and Smith, 2014).

As mentioned above, there is a precursor to this thinking: the Japanese design principle of wabi-sabi. Drawing from wabi-sabi, incompleteness can be an elementary part of the

research design. Also, applying process ontology indicates accepting incompleteness, as the things are in a state of constant becoming and are never fully completed in that respect. In order to avoid manipulating or objectifying a phenomenon to the mere project(ion)s of will, we need to wait for its temporal character to become disclosed through the inquiry (Figal, 2009a; Gadamer, 1977; Howard and Küpers, 2017). It is in this sense that objects can be said to have performative qualities and to "talk" (Beyes and Steyart, 2012; Humphries and Smith, 2014; Yanow, 2010); and it is in this sense that to listen to things talk is not meant as a sign of "soft" research, but as an imperative that requires dedication to hard analytical, detailed work, and checking whether the findings hold or not against the richness of materials (Weick, 2007). This may prove to be the sort of analytical work that not everybody is capable of without proper training and practice. Sergi and Hallin (2011) describe research as a "thick performance" embedded in emotional, embodied, even intimate personal experiences. Being in the thick of things, under pressure, requires similar nerves from the researcher as those that athletes require at peak moments: to give the best, most imaginative work under pressure. Despite the pressure, one should be guided by letting-be, being released to the elements. Yet the researcher is in an ultra-endurance sport, so to speak, as she needs this ability for many hours every working day, not only for short periods of competition.

Concluding remarks: ethics of interpretation

Finally, there is an ethical dimension in stressing materiality. Instead of approaching the material world as it was already (instrumentally and intentionally) known, Introna (2013) and Howard and Küpers (2017) call for a new research ethos of letting-be that respects the materiality. This post-human orientation regards objects as more than relative entities to social narratives (Humphries and Smith, 2014, p. 479). Post-human ethics is concerned with the future environmental consequences and sustainability of the material world (Carlile *et al*., 2013). According to Davis (2007), philosophical hermeneutics takes a stance according to which the matter possesses qualities that reach beyond our will and can be defined more broadly than mere tools for (our) determined ends. Following this hermeneutic ethos, George (2012) argues that we should take the things "in their independence from us and take them as a measure for our own conduct instead of relating

to them improperly by subjugating them to our wills through the rationalities of modern science and technology" (p. 30). Thus, the ethical attitude would take a critical stance towards prejudices that promote some particular academic-political or methodological institutionalisations instead of being sensitive to phenomena and the natural world these are embedded in. Again, a poet may offer some methodological advice:

Midway upon the journey of our life
I found myself within a forest dark,
For the straightforward pathway had been lost.

Ah me! how hard a thing it is to say
What was this forest savage, rough, and stern,
Which in the very thought renews the fear.

So bitter is it, death is little more;
But of the good to treat, which there I found,
Speak will I of the other things I saw there.

I cannot well repeat how there I entered,
So full was I of slumber at the moment
In which I had abandoned the true way.

(Dante Alighieri, n.a)

In Dante's poem, diverging from the beaten path and taking an unanticipated turn may soon feel like being lost in an alien forest, which Dante associates with abandoning "the true way". Applied to our topic of the messiness of qualitative research, Dante's reference to "true" suggests that the risk of hasty analysis is not only an epistemological, but also an ethical concern. Objectivity and releasement are terms that advise treating non-human materiality – "a universe packed with objects and events that generally go about their business without any great regard for human agency" (Clark, 2007) – with dignity and respect. In today's competitive academic environment, do we have time to pay close attention to things that do not show themselves readily and to explore unknown tracks? How often does our result-oriented "work ethic" interfere with environmental or post-human concerns? This paper suggests it is time to abandon the – what Dante calls – fear of the "savage, rough, and stern", to walk a road less travelled by, and to take "the 'other-

than-human' agency" (Clark, 2007) and the commitments to our environment more seriously in qualitative research. So far we have been allowed to use – exploit, really – the nature without almost any hesitation. By having explored the human condition, acclaimed poets such as Dante and Frost suggest these sorts of diversions can make all the difference. Research methodologies cannot hide their head in the bushes anymore, either: in order to create more just and sustainable futures, the way the matter matters in our methodologies is of primary importance.

Acknowledgements

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FIGURES AND TABLES:

FIGURE 1

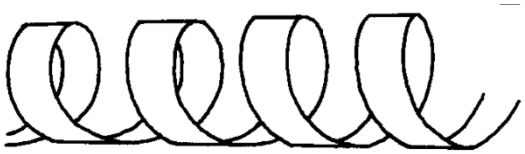

Figure 1: The hermeneutic circle

[i] As a side note, it can be added that although this shift in hermeneutics coincides with the more general "material turn" in social sciences and philosophy (Barad, 2003; Carlile *et al*., 2013), it is not influenced by it.
[ii] Figal was a student of Gadamer, and Gadamer was a student of Heidegger and Husserl.